

Frank Festa: Welcome to On the Ballot with Ballotpedia, where we connect people to politics by providing neutral, nonpartisan, and reliable information on our government, how it works, and where it's headed. I'm Frank Festa, and thanks for being with us. Last night, Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump took to the debate stage at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

I'm joined now by the Philadelphia Inquirer's Julia Terruso, who's been closely following the election, the buildup to last night's debate, and PA politics this cycle which are bound to play a big role on the national stage. Julia, thanks for coming on the show.

Julia Terruso: Thanks for having me.

Frank Festa: There was a lot on the line for both Harris and Trump heading to the debate last night. Can you frame the stakes for each candidate for us?

Julia Terruso: Oh, sure. Huge, uh, highly anticipated. Um, I think, you know, every adjective in the book was used, but for a good reason, because this has just been an unprecedented presidential election campaign that's, you know, looking neck and neck with a little less than two months to go.

So this debate, which could possibly be the only debate in the race, is one that I think both campaigns were really focused on just to see if it could move the needle. And I, I think both campaigns set out to do slightly different things with some success and with not so much success, which I'm sure we're going to talk about too.

Frank Festa: Definitely. According to Nielsen, I was just looking at some of the numbers this morning, a little over 51 million people watched the debate last night, which we should note according to Nielsen again, that's a pretty sizable drop in viewership from the first Biden Trump debate in 2020, which drew over 73 million viewers.

Most of our listeners, like I mentioned before we talked Julia, have either turned into the debate themselves or have already caught the highlights at some point today. So substantively speaking, what was each candidate's message to voters on the national stage? What was their case as for why they're the best choice to become the next commander-in-chief?

Julia Terruso: Yeah, I think both candidates were setting out to primarily speak to that very small group of voters that are still undecided, you know, former president Trump is a well-known politician. The majority of people have kind of made up their mind on how they feel about him. Vice President Kamala Harris, despite being vice president of the country, is a little less known, which is what, you know, we see in polls, what I hear when I talk to voters, so I think for Trump, he, he wanted to appeal to those voters kind of in the middle by trying to define Harris on issues like the economy, which we know is the biggest issue for voters in this race on issues like immigration, tying her to President Biden because his administration's policies, particularly on those two issues, are very unpopular.

And for Harris, I think it was to kind of goad Trump into being Trump and showing some of those characteristics that can turn off voters, particularly voters who aren't already in his camp, and to own defining of her own policies and background and trying to kind of fill in some of the gaps that some voters might have about who she is.

Frank Festa: It'll probably take a second until we have polling we can truly rely on related to the debate, right? I'm sure you were scrolling around on X like I was and seeing all the snap reactions and who knows really is filling those things outright, so I'm not sure how much we can rely on.

Julia Terruso: Yeah, those three undecided voters that CNN had it's like, oh, okay

Frank Festa: Right, exactly. You're here. They are there. This is them. They're the representatives for everybody. But as you've been looking around and talking with people, what are the initial reactions you're seeing and hearing about how both

candidates performed and how the presidential race might have been impacted by the performance?

Julia Terruso: I'm overwhelmingly hearing that on the particular goal of reaching undecided voters or voters in the middle, Harris was far more effective than Trump last night and that her ability to kind of bait him into, you know, talking about the size of his rallies or some of these fringe conspiracy or frankly false theories out there, uh, really distracted from the goal that his campaign had, which was to talk about the economy, to define Harris, to kind of highlight some of the issues that she has changed her, her position on in the past.

So that's what I'm hearing. Now I'm not, especially, and I'm hearing it, I think it's worth stating from, for Republicans in Pennsylvania too, who are saying it was kind of a missed opportunity for him to, to not necessarily to the extent that they think it might result in a major shift in this race, but, but that's kind of the, the, um, where are we Wednesday morning takes and that Harris really did show kind of her strength, her command of the stage, although some folks say, you know, she might not have gotten that into the nitty gritty on some of these policies that voters were looking for more answers on.

Frank Festa: And you were actually in the spin room last night after the debate when Trump walked in. That must have been pretty exciting. I'll also note, I don't know what the spin room means. I'm not sure why they call it that. So if you could both define what that's supposed to be and what it was like for us, I'd appreciate it.

Julia Terruso: Sure. The spin room was not on the site of where the debate hall was. The debate hall is at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia. And the spin room was at the convention center a little under a mile away in this just like cavernous room with I think they said close to a thousand reporters from all over the country and then surrogates are milling about in this very cold overly air conditioned room with uh, tv monitors and and so after the debate, um, all of these surrogates came in and they had these skinny little signs that say their names so that you can like look out into a crowd full of people and see, uh, you know, for

me, I was looking out for the Pennsylvania Governor Shapiro and you see his sign peeking up and you know that that crowd of people following him around. That's where he is.

So it's kind of a, strange, um, uh, way to report on a presidential election, but we're all milling about, you know, RFK was there, again, Governor Shapiro was there, Governor Cooper, Senator Rick Scott, you know, surrogates on both sides. And then all of a sudden, Big swell of people just raced toward the front of the room, and it was, um, former President Trump himself who had walked in, and, I mean, it was, it was very crowded, very hard to hear him, but he did give some brief remarks.

Frank Festa: And to be clear really quickly, he was not supposed to be there, right? That was not a scheduled appearance?

Julia Terruso: No. It was a total surprise. You know, we, we kind of thought the, the biggest name, on the Republican side, it was going to be Senator J. D. Vance who was milling about his running mate. It's very rare for the actual candidate to come to the spin room.

And, you know, that led a lot of people to speculate that while Trump said, you know, he thought he won the debate, his mere presence in that room suggested that he wanted to do some damage control and spin for himself, essentially.

Frank Festa: Sure, and I guess that's where we get the, the spin from, the spin room.

Julia Terruso: Yes, that's where, yeah.

Frank Festa: If I have it right, Kamala Harris was not there, correct?

Julia Terruso: Correct. She did make a brief appearance at a campaign watch party that her campaign had organized, you know, said a couple words with her husband,

waved to the crowd, walked off to a Taylor Swift song moments after the pop star had endorsed her, but she did not go to the spin room.

And yeah, I think that's a distinction that says a little bit about how each campaign thought they performed for each candidate.

Frank Festa: Very interesting. Let's zoom in on Pennsylvania politics. I know that's your primary focus here. How did each candidate speak directly to voters in the Commonwealth?

Julia Terruso: Well, I think voters in Pennsylvania really do mirror kind of your average voter and certainly your average swing voter all over the, the country.

You know, broadly, I think for the former president, he tried to talk about the economy and immigration, which remain issues that he's more popular on and that, you know, I do hear traveling across Pennsylvania. We're not necessarily a state you would associate with immigration, but there are a lot of areas where that is a topic and the border is a topic that comes up kind of in the same conversation as the economy.

And for Harris, I think, you know, she, again, was aware of kind of, the fatigue that some more independent voters have over over Trump and and wanted and did an effective job of goading him into some moments where he was certainly not restrained and certainly kind of going off on on tangents that are probably not what undecided voters who vote for him say they want to hear about policies and specifics wanted to hear about.

In terms of specific Pennsylvania issues, you know, fracking is the big one. We heard about that in Vice President Kamala Harris's first CNN interview. We heard about it again last night. You know, Pennsylvania is a state where hydraulic natural gas fracking is a big industry in a lot and Harris, you know, again said that she does not when, when she ran previously, she said she would, she would ban fracking when she was running in 2019.

She walked that back when she became President Biden's running mate. And she said that, you know, she still stands by that 2020 amended stance, that she would not ban fracking, that she thinks it's good for the economy. You know, Trump, I think continues to argue he doesn't believe that. And I do think that was an issue that Harris's position shifts that got somewhat lost in the, in the mix of the night, which I think is good news for her. The moderators asked a question about a number of things she'd changed her position on. She addressed fracking. She didn't really address the other two issues. And because the debate wound up being about so much else, I'm not sure that former president Trump was able to kind of make the debate about that either.

Frank Festa: So what were the vibes like in Philly? I know that there was no audience again in attendance, but how about leading up to the debate after it was over? And of course, any protests or demonstrations that might've taken place. And then we heard a little bit about that.

Julia Terruso: Yeah, I would say internally, the Inquirer politics team is always talking about how it feels like Pennsylvania is the center of the political universe. Um, this week it really felt like Philadelphia was the center of the political universe. We, you saw the Harris campaign took out some very kind of pandering ads that paid homage to some of Philadelphia's favorite delicacies.

So there was a, there were billboards up that said, you know, Philly is with Kamala Harris, which is awesome. What we use when we're ordering cheesesteaks and we want onions. We say wit onions, wit wizz which means with onions and with cheese wizz

Frank Festa: yeah, wit are wittout right?

Julia Terruso: Yeah, wit or wittout Um, and then there were you know there was a drone show over the art museum. So, I think, you know, that's interesting for a couple reasons. Obviously, the Harris campaign wants to get a lot of attention on this debate, but Philadelphia is also a really important city for her in Pennsylvania.

So, any motivation that she can kind of draw out, any momentum that she can draw out here, you know, she's gonna hope she can build on it and ride through to November.

And then there were, there were absolutely protests. There was a pro-Palestinian protest that wound through Center City, kind of, um, you know, near where the debate was happening. Those protests have been ongoing in Philadelphia and a, uh, abandoned Biden movement has, has now transitioned into an abandoned Harris movement. Protesters arguing that she doesn't deserve the vote of people who, for whom that's a, that's a really key issue either.

Frank Festa: What's next here, Julia? I know that everybody's asking this question and nobody really has a straight answer yet, but do we think that there's going to be another debate? I don't think, obviously, well, right, Biden and Trump debated once already, but in terms of general election candidates, I'm not sure that we've had an election where the two primary candidates haven't debated more than once.

So do we think that there's going to be another debate?

Julia Terruso: I would guess it's something that that Trump is weighing right now. You know, he's already out there I saw, talking to Fox News about well, if we did one, you know, here's who I would like to moderate and so it seems like we're in the, we're in the will they won't they phase.

But, you know, it's, it's hard to say. I did, I talked to a lot of other, I talked to several Republicans today who said they think that Trump should debate again. That they think, you know, he can do better than he did last night and that Americans and voters deserve to, to see these two and for both of them to be pressed a little bit more on what their policies are. I don't know that it will make a huge difference, but there is a vice-presidential debate on the books. That's in early October. So certainly if we don't get another presidential debate, that one might be in the spotlight.

Frank Festa: Definitely excited to see how that one plays out. Julia Terruso, the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Thank you again so much for your time. We'll have to have you back on the show or hopefully get to chat again soon.

Julia Terruso: Thank you so much.

Frank Festa: Yeah, and our listeners, please stay tuned. We'll be right back with staff writer Ellen Morrissey with more on last night's debate and where things go from here.

Ellen, thanks for coming on the show.

Ellen Morrissey: Hey, thanks for having me.

Frank Festa: Great to have you back. You are our most frequent guest at this point, so we really appreciate your time.

Ellen Morrissey: Hey, no problem. It's, you know, it's presidential election season, you know.

Frank Festa: Yes, it is. It's that time of year. Exactly. Julia gave us a really great overview of the Big Picture to start our episode, but let's get a little bit more granular now.

How does Ballotpedia seek to cover these debates for our audience?

Ellen Morrissey: Yeah, so we want to provide the kind of basics, the who, what, when, where. So who's hosting this debate, who's participating in it, things like that, where it's taking place. And then one of the big kind of avenues of coverage we have is we write up summaries of what each candidate said during the debate with a focus on policy.

So we generally don't include too much of like the criticisms unless it's like something kind of more substantive or it's like a big kind of moment in the debate. But we don't, you know, we try to avoid kind of getting caught up in like the mic drop moments is what we call them. So that's generally our approach.

Frank Festa: That's somebody else's job, right?

Ellen Morrissey: Exactly.

Frank Festa: With that in mind, these summaries are all available on our page that we'll have linked in our show notes. Folks can go check them out if they really want to get into the nitty gritty there of what each candidate had to say. But Helen, for our audience now, can you give us a brief summary of the highlights that stuck out to you from each candidate?

Ellen Morrissey: I thought I'd, um, pull up kind of two issues where I think we saw some substantive policy differences. First, on kind of the domestic side, a classic, the economy. We saw Harris talk about this kind of like three part policy that she's brought up, um, before and we've seen on her recently published campaign issues website where she wants to build more housing and provide first time homebuyers with 25, 000. She wants to implement a 6, 000 tax cut for young families and a 50, 000 tax deduction for new small businesses.

And then we saw Trump, kind of, his big policy that he highlighted for improving the economy was implementing tariffs. He said that China and other countries were ripping America off with high prices. And said America would take in hundreds of billions of dollars of revenue through these tariffs. And then kind of looking at a sample issue from the foreign policy section of the debate, the Russia-Ukraine war, um, Harris said that, uh, she and Biden had brought together 50 countries to support Ukraine and kind of looking ahead, broader implications said that, you know, if Putin isn't stopped in Ukraine, he will continue to invade other countries, uh, possibly other NATO countries, um, which would draw the U.S. into a war.

Frank Festa: Poland was the country that was mentioned, right? I believe.

Ellen Morrissey: Yeah, Poland was mentioned and then kind of, you know, elsewhere in Europe as well.

Frank Festa: Right.

Ellen Morrissey: And then Trump had kind of a different view. He said he would negotiate to end the war before he even took office. He said he'd do it as president elect if he won.

And he also said that Europe should be paying more money to support Ukraine. And he said, his kind of view on the long-term implications was that if this war continues, it could lead to another world war. He brought up Russia being a nuclear power. So, that's kind of a quick summary of two issues, but there were a lot of issues, and as he said, people can read more by looking at our debate page.

They can see what Harris and Trump had to say on things like trade, abortion, immigration, Trump's indictments, the 2020 election results, Harris's 2020 presidential campaign policies. There's some more foreign policy stuff in there, including the Israel-Hamas war and the Afghanistan withdrawal. And then, um, the candidates also discussed healthcare, climate change, manufacturing.

Frank Festa: One of my favorite things we track is how much time each candidate takes up during the debate. As in how long, literally, each candidate is talking for, how much space they're taking up. What did that split look like?

Ellen Morrissey: Uh, yeah. So last night, uh, Trump spoke for 42. 9 minutes while Harris spoke for 37. 6 minutes.

Um, so that puts Trump with a 5. 3 minute edge. This kind of matches with what we saw back during the June 27th debate between Biden and Trump. Trump had a 4. 5 minute edge there. I went ahead and looked back. We have presidential debate

coverage going back through 2016. Um, so among the seven presidential general debates that Trump has participated in, he has spoken the longest in all but one of them.

The third debate versus Hillary Clinton in 2016, uh, Clinton, uh, had the edge in speaking time there, but otherwise, the pattern continues here.

Frank Festa: Yeah, I think that's really interesting. It's kind of the stuff that you can find on Ballotpedia that a lot of the people don't pay a ton of attention to, so I think it's always cool to, to learn more about that history there.

There was a lot of deliberation about the actual terms of this debate. Things like, when it would take place, what the rules would be, who would moderate. So on and so forth. How's that factoring into the aftermath and how people are thinking about each candidate's performance?

Ellen Morrissey: A little bit of background on the scheduling here.

This debate It was scheduled quite a while ago, um, it was scheduled before Biden had withdrawn from the race, so it was originally going to be Trump vs. Biden, um, but then Biden withdrew on July 21st. After that, there was kind of some uncertainty on how ex on whether you know, who would be participating, whether this debate was still on.

Immediately after Biden withdrew, Trump said he hadn't agreed to debate Harris. He had only agreed to debate Biden. And then Harris came out and said she's going to show up to this debate, regardless of whether Trump does. And then Trump proposed maybe holding a different debate with Fox News, which ended up just being a town hall that he held with him on September 4th.

And eventually, by August 8th, Trump had come back around and said, oh, I actually will participate in this debate. Long story short, there's quite a bit of back and forth on whether or not the two candidates would be participating. There was

also some kind of, uh, not controversy, but there was, uh, some discussion, I think, or I saw some reporting about, um, The Harris team wanting to change the rules of the debate a bit and wanting there to be live mics for both of the candidates.

The way it ended up playing out was that there were, um, muted mics, so when it was not the candidates turn to speak, their microphone was muted. Um, if you wanna kind of get a taste of like how that changes the vibe of a debate, you can go ahead and compare what we saw last night to the first debate in 2020 where there were no li where the mics were live the entire time.

Um, so it can definitely kind of change, like, the energy in the room. And then something else to consider, too, is that, you know, moderators play a big role in a debate and kind of guiding what the conversation looks like. So the ABC News moderators, uh, they, they kind of got, this is something we consider a lot in our debates is, like, to what degree are moderators leading with their questions and kind of to what degree are candidates actually thinking these things?

A good example we talk about sometimes is during the Republican primaries, there is this one debate where a moderator asked Chris Christie about UFOs, you know, and I'm not sure we didn't end up including in our summaries cause we were like, this probably isn't super top of mind for most voters. Um, So what moderators decide to ask about can also really guide the content of the debate.

Frank Festa: Definitely. I think I think we saw that last night for sure. Ellen, I asked Julia the same question, but it feels appropriate to ask you as well. Again, for this debate, there was a lot of back and forth about the details whether or not it was going to happen all that stuff. Do we think that there's going to be another debate? What are you hearing so far and seeing in the media?

Ellen Morrissey: Before last night, we had seen both Harris and Trump express some interest in another debate. They hadn't necessarily agreed on details or anything yet, but they had both said they were interested. Um, and then I believe after this most recent debate concluded, uh, the Harris team said they wanted to

participate in another debate, and then Trump sounded a bit more iffy about whether he'd want to participate in a debate. He said he'd want to be with different moderators, um, things like that. So, you know, if the lead up to last night's debate is any indication, you know, it's possible we could see another debate and there's just a lot of back and forth on, you know. The rules, who hosts it, that kind of thing.

Interestingly, if this is the last presidential debate, this would be the fewest debates between general election candidates that we've seen since the seventies, um, since 1976. general election candidates have participated in at least two debates against each other, um, before election day. Even if we don't get another presidential debate, uh, we still have the vice-presidential debate to look forward to in a couple of weeks on October 1st, uh, so that'll be fun.

Frank Festa: Yeah, well, we'll have you back on the show to talk about it. Then there's 54 days between now, September 11th and the election. So a lot of time to go back and forth on whether or not they will actually schedule this second debate. Helen Morrissey, Valipedia staff writer. Thank you again. Always appreciate your time.

I know we'll be talking to you again soon.

Ellen Morrissey: Sweet. Thank you.

Frank Festa: And for our listeners, you can learn more about our presidential election coverage at the links in our show notes. You can also find a link to some of Julia's work there as well. We'll be back next week with another episode. Make sure you subscribe to On the Ballot wherever you listen to podcasts.

I'm Frank Festa and thanks again for listening. We'll see you next week.